



Values Conflict (as outlined by the Tribal Elders Workgroup) **Montana Indian Education Association 2004 Conference**

1. Montana's plains tribes were nomadic people. They remain nomadic. Entire families may pick up and move to another location, another school, another community on a moment's notice. Moves are often predicated upon a child having a problem in the school; and consequently, mobility is a perceived method of problem solving.
Nomadic mobility also creates conflicts with school grading and attendance policies where continuity of schooling is perceived as essential to success and school mobility is perceived as irresponsible parenting.
2. The ward relationship between Indian people and the federal government has generational impact on traditional values. Indian people were perceived by federal policymakers as incapable of managing their own personal and financial affairs, removing personal responsibility from traditional roles. Indian people needed permission from federal Indian agents or Bureau of Indian Affairs agents, for example, to conduct mundane business most of us take for granted. Such basic necessities as the need to sell a cow to buy school supplies for your children required the approval of the federal agent, whose approval or rejection constituted the final authority. Indian people up until recent times of self-determination had no control over own their own personal possessions, could not sell or lease their own property, or even maintain their own bank accounts. Parts of this system remain in place today and impact decision-making as well as providing a basis for the absence of long-term planning of Indian families.
3. US history documents that Indian people following the Plains Indian wars in the American West were placed on reservation lands perceived by capitalistic entrepreneurs of the times as unsuitable for economic development. Assimilation policies of the early 1900's attempted to make farmers of these same nomadic tribal people – on land already deemed unsuitable for enterprise. Failure was perceived as a shortcoming of the values of the culture group, perpetuating continuation of the ward relationship and policies that attempted to further erode traditional value systems.
4. The traditional role of the male was removed from the northwest Plains cultures with implementation of the ward relationship and general assistance policies. Until the late 1900's, economic assistance to families was awarded to women with children. Families with a male in the household were penalized, encouraging the breakdown of traditional family structures as well as family role responsibilities for males. With unemployment the norm rather than the exception on reservations, families were dependent upon federal assistance for survival and responsibility fell to women as the family provider, pre-empting the role of the traditional male and drastically impacting traditional values.
5. Most Americans acknowledge education as the path to success. Most immigrants to this country embraced education as the most predictable link to achievement of the American dream. Many willingly sacrificed their cultural beliefs and traditions in pursuit of this dream. For Montana's tribal people, the Boarding School provided this educational "service". There is a significant difference, however. American's immigrant populations CHOSE the path of education, often at considerable hardship. Indian people, as wards of the government, had no choice. The Federal government held



all decision-making power – no matter age, gender or mental abilities of the Native person. Indian children were forcibly removed from families and sent to distant government boarding schools. Parents had absolutely no role in the educational decisions made for their children.

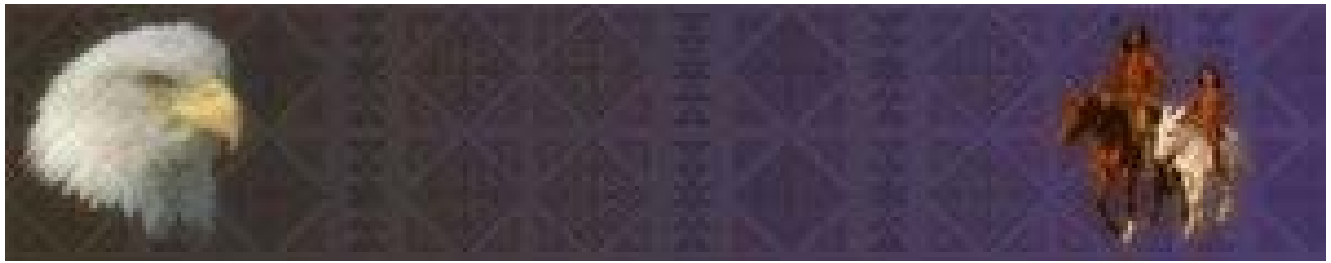
On the positive side, most boarding school attendees do credit the schools for providing them with a solid basic education. They read, write, and speak with mainstream competency. However, the boarding school era also had devastating impact on tribal groups. One of its primary objectives was to squash all tribal culture and traditions (Assimilation Policy). Students were severely punished for speaking their language or practicing their cultural traditions. Many students reported physical, mental and sexual abuse.

- One consequence of the Boarding School policy is that many Indian parents today, though recognizing the benefits of a good education, are also very suspect of educational institutions and hold negative perceptions of educational systems.
 - Traditional northwest Plains cultures had very strict standards of social interaction. The protection of children physically and sexually was paramount to the survival of tribal bands. The propensity for a climate of abuse at the boarding schools, however, broke traditional values and created generational consequences in Indian country. Medical, psychological, and social research document the propensity of the abused to themselves becomes the abuser. Treatment for abuse suffered at the boarding schools was non-existent on the reservations, and Indian communities have now experienced a pattern of abuse through several generations. Today, over 80% of Indian youth participating in chemical dependency programs on one reservation in Montana reported sexual abuse in a study completed in 1999. Traditional taboos surrounding the open discussion of sexual issues in Plains cultures exasperates addressing the problem, further contributing to the breakdown of traditional values.
 - The propensity for abuse at boarding schools created patterns of psychological isolation as a self-survival response, directly conflicting with tribal values and lifestyles. The result had dire consequences on family structures. Children learned that it was not wise to be singled out for attention at Boarding schools as it usually resulted in negative consequences. To avoid attention, children learned to remain very low-key, never excel or blatantly fail, or to divert attention by sacrificing others. These strategies all created distrust among peers, including those considered family and friends as those people were the very ones possessing information about you that could be used against you by the friend to deflect attention from him or herself.
 - Since psychological treatment was not available on reservations for young adults returning from boarding schools, most lamented the loss of close human contact by self-medicating, creating generational drug and alcohol abuse.
6. Tribal governments have reported that since Indian children were removed from the home to attend boarding schools at such an early age, Indian people are now faced with a legacy of 4 to 6 generations absent a positive parenting model. Traditional models were dismantled with the disruption of family structures and clan systems, and the surrogate models found at boarding schools were dysfunctional at best, destructive at worst.
 7. Tribal plains groups disproportionately live in impoverished conditions. Unemployment rates in Indian communities in Montana are reported as averaging over 50% in many locations. The



educational ramifications of generational poverty are well documented. Additionally, plains tribal cultures were communal communities. Tribal members share wealth, or lack of it. Federal relocation policies of the 1960's tried to change this lifestyle. Under relocation, Indian people were moved to major metropolitan centers, trained for jobs and provided employment. Unacceptance of Indian traditional cultural values and isolation experienced in many urban settings convinced many to return to the reservation - and poverty. Likewise, when one family finds the resources to move to a location with promise of opportunities, extended family follows. Traditional values prevent families from turning away these extended family members. Students in this home situation find basic resources scarce and homework assignments likely impossible to complete.

8. Plains tribal cultures were focused on communal living and cooperative rather than competitive learning. Historically, survival of the entire tribe was dependent upon cooperative behavior. A decision to act independently by a single individual could result in the annihilation of the entire band by one's enemies. (The reader also must remember that this "on the edge" lifestyle is NOT in the distant past. There are still a few elders living today who directly experienced this lifestyle. Warriors of the Plains Indian Wars are only one generation removed from this history; their grandchildren can still tell their stories.) Cooperative learning remains a value in Indian plains cultures today. Conflict with mainstream values occurs when materials dismiss cooperative learning as a primary focus for learning - or even more to the point, ignore alternative evaluations of mastery learning over test-taking competitive methodology where cooperative learning is equated with cheating.
9. The above example is not to be interpreted to mean that Indian students are not competitive. Individualism and excellence are encouraged in plains cultures. It "looks" different in these cultures, however, and self recognition is not promoted over the common good of the group, a value that can conflict with capitalistic ideology, for example.
10. Most Anglo generated programs focus on values as the difference between right and wrong. This tends to produce materials that evoke responses in terms of absolutes, resulting in situations where the value promoted demeans traditional values. As an example, consider the traditional value of gaining honor for self and one's tribe by "counting coup" (pronounced coo) Although over-simplifying the concept here, one way to achieve that honor was to inflict damage on an enemy without killing him - instead one could embarrass him, for example, in front of his tribe. So a warrior could "count coup" on an enemy by sneaking (a word with negative connotation in Anglo value systems) into an enemy camp and capturing or stealing (another negative word) the enemy's horses. Horses in Plains cultures were equated with wealth and position. They provided transportation, promoted acquisition of a food supply and served the warrior well in battle. Warriors highly valued their horses and as such were supposed to protect and carefully care for them. To lose a good horse meant that one had failed in his responsibility to provide the proper level of protection and care of a prized possession. That warrior lost face. Anglo values identify stealing as wrong and immoral. Indian students provided these materials as learning tools therefore perceive their cultural traditions as being bad, wrong, or immoral. (see attached random samples of Anglo-generated character education materials)
11. The role of coyote or trickster in traditional cultural learning is equated with a variety of negative values in mainstream White middle-class culture.
12. American Indians are subjected to discrimination in housing, employment, education, and services. American Indians are also overrepresented in the legal system. Law enforcement is minimal on



reservations and off reservation is perceived in terms of “profiling”. Law has been used to take their land and their children.

The Anglo punitive response to crime is also counter to traditional effective responses based on restorative justice. Indians have traditionally been exempted from the benefits of common law but recipients of the consequences of non-conformity to those same laws. (Ross 1998) (Indians were not even provided citizen status in their own country until 1924 and therefore evidently fought as paid mercenaries defending this country in World War I.) This situation creates a real problem when attempting to teach Indian children about fairness or justice using Anglo-generated materials.

13. The role of grandparents, aunties and uncles, and the clan in educating Indian children is removed from the concept of parenting in white middle-class cultures. Learning was directed by the grandparent, auntie, uncle or clan member and based on mastery of the subject. “Failure” was not an option; learning tasks were repeated through example and cooperative learning structures until such time as the task was mastered – without punitive consequences. This structure drastically contradicts competitive learning structures found in school systems today.
14. The traditional role of parents was to provide protection and love the child. The parent was not the traditional disciplinarian - that was the role of the grandparent, the uncle or auntie, or the clan. Calling the parent to the school in response to a student infraction violates this traditional role. Result: The school perceives the parent as irresponsible for failing to assist the school in correcting the problem; the parent perceives his/her role as the defender or advocate of the student against the school.
15. Discipline in most Plains cultures was restorative in that inappropriate behaviors were responded to with exercises for more practice and correction of the error. Schools remove children from the room; traditional Indian values would create a situation where the child would be provided opportunity to “witness” the appropriate behavior and then provided practice.
16. Funerals in Indian communities can last a week or more. This practice in foreign in white, middle-class societies and schools often perceive school absence for funerals as parental irresponsibility. Families see attendance at these ceremonies as paramount to maintaining family honor and required to demonstrate respect for the deceased. Extended family relationships complicate the issue as most school systems excuse absence for family business only to the extent of involvement of “immediate family”, ignoring the responsibility and respect issues expected from extended family and clan relationships in Indian country.
17. Children participate in all family/community functions with their parents. Children will be expected to attend those funerals, for example. And in planning activities for parents, schools must take into account that children will also attend. Schools will experience the impact of this cultural expectation during parent/teacher conferences when Indian parents often arrive with the child (and other siblings) in tow. Schools perceive the conference as an opportunity to partner with the parent to correct student behavior or achievement. The attendance of the child breaks the “adult” communication. Additionally, this is not the role of the parent in traditional Plains cultures. That is the role of the grandparent, uncle or clan.
18. The concept of time is different in Plains cultures. Many Anglo values materials promote “starting on time” as demonstrating respect and responsibility. In Indian communities, one demonstrates respect and responsibility by waiting until everyone is “ready” before beginning the activity.



19. Goal setting and planning is a difficult concept in Indian country. Plains cultures tend to focus on the present rather than the future - perhaps in part as a consequence of reservation dependence under the ward system on federal programs which come and go and therefore have no longevity around which planning can occur.
20. Face to face communication is the only effective and respectful communication in northwest Plains cultures. A message sent home requesting a parent/teacher meeting or a phone message requesting the same will likely fail to elicit a response. Even tribal business must be conducted face to face to achieve results.
21. Direct eye contact in Plains Indian cultures is perceived as aggressive. As a sign of respect, Indian children are taught not to “look me in the eye”. White middle-class values programs teach that eye-to-eye contact is symbolic of truthfulness.



These examples are NOT intended to be all inclusive, but serve only to highlight some of the intricate differences between Plains tribal cultural value systems and mainstream Anglo value systems which lead to problems in schools and use of traditional character education values materials.